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ABSTRACT

The paper considers the use of high fantasy (literature using preternatural settings, strong characters, teratological situations, and non-rational phenomena to show an alternative approach to reality) with gifted children and youth. Characteristics of high fantasy are considered, including the wonder it evokes, the archetypical elements it relies on, its portrayal of moral issues in conflicts between good and evil, the opportunities it provides for encouraging creativity, the existence of deeper meanings in the story, and the affinity many gifted students come to feel for the genre. Benefits of high fantasy are detailed for gifted students. (CL)

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HIGH FANTASY LITERATURE AS A GENRE FOR GIFTED CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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In the broad sense, fantasy as a literary device has been around as long as stories have been told. Storytellers and bards often embellished the truth, or made "creative adjustments of reality" (Alexander, 1973) when spinning their tales. Listeners were more than willing to have their disbelief suspended and to allow fantasy to change the raw materials of their lives into poetic images (Alexander, 1968).

As a genre of literature, fantasy portrays a world which includes supernatural elements (non-rational phenomenoa). Paradoxically, in good fantasy, these elements are used to put the readers more closely in touch with reality. Ursula LeGuin (1979), a fantasist, says that fantasy is truth--not factual, but true. "Fantasy's... truth challenges, even threatens all that is false, all that is phony, unnecessary, and trivial in life" (p. 44). Fantasy expresses reality in a way that realistic fiction cannot. It does it without verisimilitude, but instead with the language of the inner self.

Fantasy, in particular high fantasy, is literature which uses preternatural settings, strong characters, teratical situations, and non-rational phenomena to show an alternative approach to reality. Its power and ability to close in on the essence of reality, through the super-

natural, allows the reader to return to the "real" world refreshed, cleansed, and with new perspectives and insights (Alexander, 1968; Crossley, 1975; Drury, 1972; Stewig, 1980). Fantasy is unique as a genre in its ability to perform this for its readers; for this reason, it merits further exploration.

High Fantasy

The term "high" fantasy implies that another type exists, and indeed, it does: "low" fantasy. Time will be spent discussing "low" fantasy only where it serves to clarify "high" fantasy.

The first and most noticeable motif in high fantasy is the setting (Alexander, 1979; Attebury, 1980; Cullinan, 1981; Tymn, Zahorski, and Boyer, 1979; Zahorski and Boyer, 1982). Low fantasy is set in the present, the here and now, the world recognized as familiar and rational; on the other hand, high fantasy is set in a secondary world. This fantastic world, always compellingly described (Stewig, 1980), is integral to the story (Wolfe, 1975). In high fantasy, the story cannot be uprooted and replanted in the primary world and still work. The secondary world is proffered so that the "fantastic and magical becomes the expected and normal" (Attebury, 1980, p. 12).

The secondary worlds may be remote (e.g. Prydain, Earthsea), juxtaposed primary and secondary worlds with

magical portals (e.g. Narnia) or worlds within worlds (Zahorski and Boyer, 1982). The designation does not matter; what matters is the internal consistency of that secondary world (Alexander, 1965; Attebury, 1980; Cullinan, 1981; Stewig, 1980; Waggoner, 1978). If the author creates a consistent world, with a story which conforms to the parameters of that world, the readers will have the faith to leap the gap between the primary and the secondary world (Mobley, 1974).

To ensure this "leap of faith," the author must establish a premise on which the rest of the story is firmly based. Mobley (1974) emphasizes that the author must then be faithful to the rules that have been set down. Alexander (1965) states that

> In the algebra of fantasy, A times B doesn't have to equal B times A. But once established, the equation must hold throughout the story. You may set your own ground rules, and in the beginning, decree as many laws as you like... (p. 143)

but once those ground rules are established, nothing illogical can occur, or readers will be jarred out of the world they have entered in faith.

As with a syllogism, the logic in fantasy is based on the givens; the logic remains valid as long as it is consistent with the givens, even if the givens are not factual. From beginning to end, logic must pervade the fantasy, or it falls flat. The secondary world "must be

all of a piece, with careful and consistent handling of background, implements, and characters" (Alexander, 1965, p. 142). Once the boundary lines are drawn, the author must not wander beyond them; readers must unconsciously feel that the author is working consistently within the frame of reference that s/he has created (Cameron, 1962, 1983).

The characters must operate within the context that has been established by the author. Since characterization is one of the strongest elements in high fantasy (Stewig, 1980), after reading a story, one knows the characters--what they are like, how they would behave in new situations, what grieves them, the manner of their speech. Alexander (1965) believes that this powerful story characterization is a result of the internally consistent logic which must prevail in high fantasy. He says

> Insistence on plausibility and rationality can work for the writer, not against him. In developing his characters, he is obliged to go deeper instead of wider...The writer of fantasy...goes right to the core of a character, to extract the essence, the very taste of an individual personality (p. 145).

Readers get to know intimately both types of characters usually found in high fantasy: the extraordinary secondary characters and the Everyman protagonist/hero(ine). Although the characters are diverse, they are usually of an elevated nature--but their conflicts, quests, flaws, and virtues are shared by the readers--and the universal

aspects of the characters take precedence over the individual personality traits (Tymn, Zahorski, and Boyer, 1979). A holistic impression of the character remains with the reader, long after the book is replaced on the shelf.

The secondary characters may be as unwonted as the imagination permits, as long as they operate within the realm of the secondary world. They may be humans with remarkable characteristics or powers, they may be animals with unusual abilities or qualities, they may be "normally" inanimate objects which possess human characteristics in the secondary world, or they may be unclassifiable creatures which are born in the genius of the creator's mind.

Large or small, no secondary character should be ignored. Every character in high fantasy is portentous. No superfluous characters will be present. If the book is part of a series, and a character appears with seemingly no significance, readers can be confident that in a later book, this character will reappear for a significant reason. Every character, every act, every thought in high fantasy is meaningful "because everything connects with, or signifies everything else" (Attebury, 1980, p. 13).

The protagonist, or hero(ine) is almost always an "Everyman" character, human or human-like, with concomitant strengths and weaknesses. Attebury (1980) believes it is important to have such a limted hero in the unlimited realm of fantasy; it provides a character with whom readers

readily identify.

The protagonist is often the unlikely, "reluctant" hero (Aquino, 1977) who neither desires nor is up to undertaking the task, "but once the task is undertaken, the commoner-hero discovers hitherto unsuspected qualities of nobility: courage, generosity, loyalty to the right" (Tymn, Zahorski, and Bover, 1979, p. 8). Since the hero(ine) starts out at less than a lofty position, much room for growth is available and although not necessarily youthful, s/he possesses a certain naiveté regarding life (Wolfe, 1975). Readers are able to observe (and vicariously experience) the growth and development of the protagonist through his/her coming of age (Manlove, 1983). His/her quests, concerns, downfalls, successes, and triumphs become the readers'.

The central figure in high fantasy does not just rise to the top, overcoming obstacles with a pass of the magic wand. Alexander (1968) states that "fantasy...is fond of pointing out that nothing is given without cost" (which is a rather realistic stance...) The fantasy hero(ine) sustains some sort of loss in the process of weathering the rites of passage into maturity.

In high fantasy, the characters are more than just individuals--they are the "upholders of moral and intellectual standards" (Attebury, 1980, p. 13). The hero(ine) sees what needs to be done by focusing on "the whole, which

is greater than either evil or good" (LeGuin, 1979, p. 66). LeGuin believes that "...fantasy is the natural, the appropriate, language for the recounting of the spiritual journey and the struggle of good and evil in the soul" (p. 68). One can be sure that it is for this reason that the authors of high fantasy have chosen this genre.

These authors reveal themselves--their philosophies, attitudes and mores--through their writing (Alexander, 1973). Anderson and Groff (1972) believe that whereas realistic fiction has authors, fantasy has creators. Developing an entire secondary world draws on the imaginative genius of an author, but creating the characters which make the fantasy high fantasy takes more than imagination. The author must reach into his/her deepest self, extracting the knowledge of human character as it resides there. The result is the essence of the creator, whose philosophy is subtly woven through the story (Cameron, 1971).

Creators of quality high fantasy would not necessarily be able to write successfully in other genres, and contrariwise, authors of other genres could not often become creators of high fantasy. High fantasy is not a genre to dabble in. Those writers who have successfully created high fantasy discovered this mode of expressing themselves, and have found that no other mode will do. Because the genre allows the author to express his/her beliefs metaphorically, therefore doing it powerfully but subtly, it

has become the choice of those who have an unorthodox but profound religious sense (Attebury, 1980), a strongly realized personal vision (Langton, 1973), and/or a rather non-conformist bent (Fredericks, 1978). Creators of high fantasy have made a conscious choice (sometimes after an unconscious discovery) to use this rather unorthodox means to deliver their passion. Ursula LeGuin, author of the high fantasy Earthsea trilogy said

> I think 'High Fantasy' a beautiful phrase. It summarizes, for me, what I value most in an imaginative work: the fact that the author takes absolutely seriously the world and the people which he has created,...that he plays his game with all his skill, and all his art, and all his heart. When he does that, the fantasy game becomes one of the High Games men play. Otherwise, you might as well play Monopoly (in Cameron, 1971, p. 130).

When one reads good high fantasy (which is a rather redundant term since high fantasy, if it possesses all the necessary elements, is good), it is apparent that the authors are thinking, pondering, agonizing, philosophical types--otherwise, the profound truths expressed would never have made it onto paper. The authors' insights and perceptions are not those of the average person, and the books they create are not average--thus it follows that high fantasy is particularly appropriate for an audience which is other than average.

The Gifted and High Fantasy Literature

Although definitions of the "gifted" exist that would define groups ranging from everyone in the world to the select group possessing I.Q.s above 140 and producing works of recognized importance, for the purposes of this paper, the following definition will be used:

> The gifted child possesses cognitive ability which makes for noticeable superiority when compared to agemates. This cognitive superiority is coupled with a propensity for creative action in any one of a multitude of areas (Greenlaw and McIntosh, book manuscript, to be published by ALA)

Because of the various qualities and needs of the gifted, high fantasy literature is particularly appropriate for them.

In building a case for using high fantasy literature with gifted children and youth, no demarcation between "children's literature" and "adult literature" will be made. In most genres, but particularly in high fantasy, the lines drawn are ambiguous, at best, anyway. Sale (1982) said that no literary category defines the audience rather than the subject except children's literature. Fantasy is for readers and real readers do not limit themselves by the age recommendations put forth by the publishers. C.S. Lewis, author of several high fantasy cycles, admits that "those of us who are blamed when old for reading childish books were blamed when children for reading books too old for us" (1963, p. 464).

As long as children can read the words, can comprehend the meaning (on whatever level), and are interested, the age category of the book should not be an obstacle. Since gifted children often read early, and once reading, usually read well, they will be progressing through books normally recommended for older students. Parents, teachers, and librarians should not worry about whether the category of fantasy is inappropriate for young children.

Winner and Gardner (1979) believe that very young children (ages 4-5) are already sensitive to the boundary between reality and fantasy, and have a preliminary grasp on the world of the imagination. MacCaan (1980) said that once children are ages 7-8, they have a firm enough grip on the real world to be able to distinguish between reality and "fantasy's improvisation on reality." They can pass easily into the highly imaginative world of fantasy partly because "they have acquired less disbelief to be suspended before they can enter" the secondary world of high fantasy (Lourie, 1980, p. 108).

WONDER

One of the central features of high fantasy is the wonder it evokes in its readers (Manlove, 1975, 1983). Young gifted children, who sometimes seem inordinately curious, will be enthralled by the secondary worlds in

high fantasy. The non-rational phenomena and mysterious creatures will gain and hold their rapt attention as they immerse themselves in that imaginary realm. The creator's attention to detail will answer the questions that will bubble to the top as soon as they begin reading. They will also appreciate the tying up of all loose ends--loose ends which, when they are left hanging in other stories, bother gifted children.

For older gifted students, still curious, and usually quite knowledgeable on a variety of subjects, the secondary worlds of high fantasy will still give them cause to wonder. "Fantasy prompts the reader to leave the printed page and follow" (Lonsdale and Mackintosh, 1973, p. 344). Fantasy provides new realms for gifted children to enter and explore. High fantasy affords awe and wonder to its readers through secondary worlds, the magical causality, the noble characters, the elevated styles, and the archetypal experiences (Tymn, Zahorski, and Boyer, 1979).

ARCHETYPE

According to the Jungian theory, residing in the unconscious of every person and influencing their perceptions, are ideas and ways of thinking which have been inherited from the experiences of the race. Thus, particular themes, situations, and characters universally elicit recognition and deep instinctual responses. High

fantasy employs such archetypes. This ancient well (Tymn, Zahorski, and Boyer, 1979), from which these archetypes are drawn, has been called the "Cauldron of Story" or the "pot of soup" which has been simmering since time immemorial (Alexander, 1971).

Creators of high fantasy go back, back, back to discover the ancient lore which appeals so universally. Hunter (1975) writes that the idea of racial memory, or ancestral memory, explains why the ancient patterns and folklore elements employed in high fantasy are so readily accepted by readers. These archetypal elements provide a "pungency that satisfies...(and) feeds a hunger we didn't know we had" (Langton, 1973, p. 195). The hunger is neither physical nor mental, but spiritual.

Gifted children, because of their intensity and sensitivity, may perceive this inner hunger. They may search for a way to satisfy the craving. The discovery of high fantasy, which draws on the tradition and conventions of earlier literature and legend (Alexander, 1971) can help fill that emptiness. In the process, these "great archetypal stories provide a framework or model for an individual's belief system" (Yolen, 1981, p. 18). Fantasy's ability to be a vehicle for clarifying a person's belief system is one aspect of its uniqueness as a genre.

MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Gifted students, being academically capable, having a sensitive nature, and possessing leadership ability, have the potential for accomplishing remarkable deeds within society. Gifted children tend to have a strong sense of fairness--of right and wrong. Clarifying and strengthening this sense serves the individuals and ultimately the society in which they live.

High fantasy always involves the conflict between good and evil. Alexander (1968) says that the skillful creator of high fantasy sets up an ethical situation which is not superimposed on the story, but is an inherent part of it. The characters are obliged to take moral stands to try and reconcile the dilemmas in which they find themselves. "As a result, without preaching or pendantry, the story gains depth and meaning." The readers, engaged intellectually and morally, are afforded an opportunity for clarifying philosophical and moral conflicts without being directly involved (Attebury, 1980).

Gifted students are very attuned to the sometimes less than clearcut choices which the fantasy hero(ine) must make. The evil in high fantasy may be rather vague (as in life). Discussion of the dilemmas and choices faced by the characters provides an excellent vent and clarification vehicle for gifted students (Poskanzer, 1975).

Getting the gifted involved with high fantasy may allow them to vicariously make some of the moral choices

that they may have to make at a future time in their own lives. A non-threatening opportunity is provided for gifted children to wrestle with right and wrong, good and evil, fair and unfair. Because of the strong character development in high fantasy and because gifted children are sensitive, they will wrestle right along with the characters. They will experience the pain that some of the decisions cause. Because it is in a story, the pain can be coped with, but it may provide a reference point for some later "real" experience.

> The great fantasies...help children to orient themselves, help them to distinguish good from evil and to learn how the forces of good and evil work. Great fantasies prepare them for the fact that just as good is a power, so is evil... Very often danger and horror are made harshly vivid, but because these dangers and horrors occur in timelessness and in the world of magic, children learn to face without shock what otherwise might be unendurable: the force of that dark message which both dreams and fantasy so often bring (Cameron, 1971, p. 137-138).

Fantasy is not escapist literature (Alexander, 1968, 1971; LeGuin, 1979; MacCaan, 1980; Rabkin, 1979; Waggoner, 1978). Rather, high fantasy could be called "invadist" for it provides its readers with a chance to invade life (not get away from it) and to "live" in a world where pain and suffering and loss and injustice are present and must be coped with, but to invade for only a short time and in a safe manner. High fantasy offers no escape from the fact that "being alive in the world is a hard

piece of business" (Alexander, 1971, p. 582).

High fantasy provides no easy answers to life as a "hard piece of business." It acknowledges the existence of sorrow and failure (Aquino, 1977) but provides hope, though not necessarily happiness (Alexander, 1968).

The hopeful, but equivocal ending is a constant of high fantasy, particularly the longer, more complex fantasies (Stewig, 1980). Stewig says these equivocal endings are advantageous for readers because (1) they reflect life as it really is (i.e. events rarely conclude neatly and happily); (2) they permit diversity of opinion (which makes them ideal for classroom discussion); and (3) they stimulate students' imaginations (i.e. the conclusion is not tightly sewn up). All three of these reasons make fantasy efficacious for use with gifted students.

CREATIVITY

The equivocal endings are just part of the way reading high fantasy stimulates creativity in the mind of its readers. Creativity involves fluency, elaboration, and flexibility in thinking. Poskanzer (1975) and Drury (1972) both laud fantasy as a tool for extending students' creativity by breaking down their rigidity, thus increasing their flexibility.

The best part about fantasy as a means for encouraging creativity is attributable to the nature of the genre. High

fantasy cannot be read passively. While it takes a creative mind to produce fantasy, it requires an active mind to enjoy it (Aquino, 1977; Lonsdale and Mackintosh, 1973). Crossley (1975) contends that whatever a reader learns from fantasy is not due to any tendentious designs of the author, but rather from their own imaginative *participation* in the work. Because fantasy invites wholehearted immersion (Cullinan, 1981) and participation, it creates activity of the mind which forces readers to respond intellectually as well as emotionally if they are to truly read high fantasy.

Stewig (1980) criticizes fantasy because of the level of concentration which is often required of its readers. Because the readers are introduced to settings and characters, usually unlike any they have ever know, Stewig believes the demands of keeping all the strands clear may be too difficult for the readers. On the other hand, this stretching of the mind is desirable for gifted readers.

The language of high fantasy is another avenue for able children to expand their minds. Gifted children and youth are fascinated and intrigued by language. The language used by the authors adds to the appeal of high fantasy to the gifted. "The language of fantasy is itself extravagant, creating oftentimes by the mere unpronounceability of names, the wonder and greatness of it all" (Mobley, 1974, p. 124). Gifted children love the extravagant, elevated style used in high fantasy. The names which could

be ancient Welsh names or plays on words, tantalize them. The humor which is visible only to the readers who can interpret the sophisticated language play will titillate gifted students. The exemplary use of language in high fantasy which calls up (rather than describes) the secondary world, stimulates the readers' imagery. Mobley (1974) continues, saying "the incantatory nature of the narrative also works on the reader, seeking to enchant, not merely to suspend disbelief...but to promote new belief" (p. 122).

This idea was also expressed by a student of Crossley (1975) who wrote in his journal that fantasy was not a willing suspension of disbelief, but a willing expansion of belief.

> When one suspends disbelief, one adopts a temporary credulity; it is just a matter of shifting stance to return to disbelief. But if an expansion of belief occurs, the shape and scope of one's world changes (p. 288).

LeGuin (1979) also has stated that reading fantasy will change a person. It is a literature which "quickens the heart and reaches levels of emotion, areas of feeling that no other form touches in quite the same way" (Alexander, 1971, p. 582). No one who reads high fantasy is touched in quite the same way, which is another element of its uniqueness.

LEVELS OF MEANING

As stated at the beginning of this section, high

fantasy cannot (and should not) be restricted to its assigned age levels, especially with gifted children. Unquestionably, different age readers will interpret the works disparately. And, rereading a fantasy after several months or several years or several decades will produce brand new meanings. Tolkien (1980) stated that children's "books, like their clothes should allow for growth, and their books at any rate, should encourage it" (p. 120).

Tymn, Zahorski, and Boyer (1979) contend that although children may not consciously grasp the deeper layers of meaning as will more mature readers (adolescents or adults), they will intuitively perceive the deeper meanings and "store them up for future recall" (p. 29). This is desirable because, as Langton (1973) states, the worlds of good fantasy are "rich freight" for children to carry around in their heads.

Fantasies are not written to blatantly reveal their ultimate secrets; they are elusively suggestive (Cullinan, 1981). The great fantasists have the ability to express truths and judgements too subtly for the intellect alone to comprehend, but the readers may subconsciously absorb the ideas into their inner being (Cameron, 1962).

> Children may not understand all that's happening below the surface of a story. It doesn't matter. Because even though they may not be able to define or verbalize it, they sense there's something more than meets the eye; on an almost subliminal level, they're aware of a richness

> of texture, of meaning and emotion--a richness that, in a great book, is inexhaustible. And the child may well come back to it again and again, perhaps long after he's stopped being a child (Alexander, 1968).

Many authors probably chose high fantasy as their medium because they could expound on a moral or a message but do it from one inner being to another. There is no need to shout in high fantasy because the opportunities for symbolism, metaphor, and allegory are constantly available.

AFFINITY

The final reason for acquainting gifted children with high fantasy is because, once acquainted, a bond is formed. They devour high fantasy and absolutely thrive on it. This could be due to any one or all of the previously discussed reasons--but once they begin reading within this category, gifted students cannot get enough!

Gifted students and high fantasy--in a relationship to be encouraged--are naturals together. Both are extraordinary, both are creative, both are intellectual, and both have a great deal to offer society.

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